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Mrs Fiona McLaughlin
Headteacher
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Dear Mrs McLaughlin

Short inspection of Spire Nursery and Infant

Following my visit to the school on 15 November 2016, I write on behalf of Her Majesty's Chief Inspector of Education, Children's Services and Skills to report the inspection findings. The visit was the first short inspection carried out since the school was judged to be good in October 2011.

This school continues to be good.

The leadership team has maintained the good quality of education in the school since the last inspection. You have a firm and sincere conviction that every pupil can, and will, succeed. This vision is captured in the school's motto of 'Aspire', which stresses the need to instil a sense of enterprise, aspiration and independence in pupils, along with ensuring that they make at least good progress and that their self-esteem becomes high.

This vision is evident when visitors tour your school, with many displays on corridors showing how staff are teaching pupils the importance of these values. The school is a warm, bright and positive learning environment, where pupils enjoy their learning and understand that they must work hard there to succeed. The very pleasant indoor corridors and classrooms are complemented by many excellent, spacious outdoor spaces that particularly make learning come alive for pupils. For example, children experience the wonder of nature by looking after their own chickens and rabbits, as well as growing many different vegetables and fruits, which they then harvest and sell or use. For example, pupils give their apples to the school cooks, who then use them to make fruit crumble for pupils to enjoy. It is little surprise that Spire's open space has been awarded Best School in the Chesterfield in Bloom competition.

You have thoroughly addressed all the areas for improvement identified by inspectors at the last inspection. This shows that the school is an improving one. Teachers now make very good use of the continuous assessment they make of what pupils can do, to plan learning that will address the gaps in knowledge, skills or understanding that pupils have. As a result, pupils' progress is good. In addition, middle leaders now play an effective part in monitoring the quality of teaching and the progress that different groups

of pupils make. They visit other classrooms to see teaching for themselves and to examine work that pupils have done. They then produce useful reports for senior leaders and for the governing body, setting out the improvements staff are making and the next steps that require attention.

Governors analyse these reports and meet regularly with staff to discuss them. They also look at pupils' work, alongside leaders, to gain a good understanding of the pupils' progress, and where teachers' practice needs to be improved further. Because of this work, and the detailed information you give them, governors are well informed. They were able to discuss with me, in a confident manner, the outcomes for different groups of pupils across the school, and in different subjects. Governors' documentation I looked at during my visit shows they play an effective strategic role in holding you and senior leaders to account, challenging you well wherever necessary, while remembering to acknowledge and congratulate staff for the successes they are achieving.

You ensure that your staff work together in shared and consistent ways for the benefit of pupils. Processes for the appraisal of staff are robust, with precise and challenging targets set to improve teachers' classroom performance. You match this with good opportunities for staff to develop their expertise. Staff who are new to the profession, or who work in less senior roles, and whom I met during my visit, told me that they are well supported and are strongly encouraged to gain further education-related qualifications.

A large majority of children who enter the school in the Nursery classes have levels of skills that are below or well below those found typically in children of the same age. Children's skills in language and communication are particularly low. However, your staff are well aware of this. They therefore waste no opportunity to improve these skills by modelling good communication to each other in front of children, and by continually conversing with the children in a clear, precise manner. They encourage children to express their own ideas, explain clearly in full sentences what they are doing and require children to use 'please' and 'thank you' when requesting things. As a result, children quickly settle in and their confidence and language begin to build. By the time they leave the school, good teaching in all year groups mean that pupils have caught up with others nationally in all subjects and their attainment is broadly in line with the expectations for their age. The most able pupils, including the most able disadvantaged pupils, make rapid progress in English because they are given particularly challenging work in reading and writing.

As well as ensuring that pupils make good academic progress from their starting points, you and your staff attend to pupils' well-being very effectively. During my visit, I saw compelling evidence of the work done to support the many pupils whose home circumstances make them vulnerable, or pupils who have special educational needs and/or disabilities. For example, the specialist Bears Nursery unit is staffed by skilled and highly caring staff who ensure excellent, tailored provision for children who attend there. Case files also show, for instance, how leaders have worked closely with families and external agencies to help greatly those pupils who find it difficult to manage their own behaviour.

Unsurprisingly, the school enjoys very strong support from parents. All of the parents I met during my visit, along with all the comments submitted to Ofsted online, were positive. As one parent explained, 'Staff provide regular feedback on our child's progress and raise any concerns with us in a timely fashion. The school is very well structured and is a professionally run, safe and caring one that enables our child to reach his potential.'

You are very aware that absence from school has increased to levels where it is considerably higher than the national average. Many of the reasons for this are due to external factors outside your control. Nevertheless, you agree that this is not always the case and that too many pupils, particularly those who are disadvantaged and pupils who have special educational needs and/or disabilities, have been persistently absent where they need not have been. You have responded to this by working more effectively with those families whose children do not come to school as often as they should, and making much clearer to all parents the need for their children to attend each day, unless there is a genuine and compelling reason. As a result, information you supplied to me during my visit shows that attendance is now rising and that the persistent absence of those groups has fallen substantially.

Safeguarding is effective.

You have ensured that all staff are well trained in safeguarding and are very vigilant in noting any signs that a pupil might be being harmed. They fully understand their responsibilities in reporting any concerns they have, however slight, to you immediately.

The leadership team has ensured that all safeguarding arrangements are fit for purpose and records are detailed and of high quality. You ensure that you make brisk referrals to a wide variety of external agencies and are unafraid to escalate your concerns if you believe that the responses of staff there are not sufficient. You recruit staff safely, checking for any gaps in employment history and requiring appropriate references for new employees.

Pupils I met during my visit described how they and their peers felt very safe in school. They told me how behaviour is good and that bullying and name-calling are infrequent. When they do occur, pupils explained that staff will attend to them quickly and effectively. They said that if they were worried about anything, they could tell a member of staff. Pupils also told me how staff teach them to protect themselves from a wide variety of dangers. For example, teachers explain to them how to cross roads safely, to take care when using electrical appliances, not to accompany strangers and not to engage with unknown people who might try to befriend them through the internet or when playing games online.

Inspection findings

- You and senior leaders have written a clear evaluation of your school that explains why teaching is good and why pupils make good overall progress from their starting points. You have then ensured that the school development plan addresses those aspects of provision that need further improvement.
- All the parents who responded to Parent View, and those with whom I met, believe that teaching is good and that their child makes good progress at the school. They

confirm that you lead and manage it well, and they would unanimously recommend it to others. Parents whose children have special educational needs and/or disabilities were particularly warm in their praise, explaining to me how staff have worked continuously with them to help their children.

- Pupils say that they enjoy their lessons, and like to come to school. They told me how teachers support them if they need to catch up, and how the most able pupils are given very difficult work that challenges them.
- Assessments that teachers make of pupils' outcomes are precise. Staff moderate these with each other on a regular basis, as well as with other schools in the cluster. The local authority also checks them for their accuracy.
- Teachers are skilled at analysing precisely which skills specific pupils lack, and then teach these systematically to them. For instance, they analyse the results of those pupils who do not pass the phonics screening check in Year 1 and then teach them the phonemes they are not confident in recognising. As a result, more of these pupils pass the following year.
- Information provided by the school, and confirmed in pupils' workbooks and learning journeys, confirms that the large majority of children enter the school with levels of skills below or well below those typically found for their age. By the time they leave the Reception Year, children have made good progress and approaching half achieve a good level of development.
- Teachers ensure that pupils continue to gain good skills in phonics in key stage 1. Provisional information indicates that the proportion of pupils who have passed the phonics screening check has risen again this year and is close to the national average. More than seven in 10 disadvantaged pupils also achieve at least the expected standard.
- Published information for previous years shows that, by the end of Year 2, pupils have caught up in all subjects and have achieved in line with others nationally. Unconfirmed information shows that this success has been sustained this year. The proportions of pupils achieving both the expected standard and a greater depth of understanding are broadly in line with the national average in reading, writing and mathematics.
- Books I looked at during my visit confirm that pupils make good progress over time. For instance, pupils in Year 1, who were writing basic single words at the start of the term, and were recognising only single numbers, are now composing full sentences and calculating sums such as $17 + 3 = 20$.
- Pupils become keen and able readers. Those whom I heard read during my visit showed that they were becoming confident with books, and could use the skills they had learned to try to read words with which they were not familiar. One pupil explained to me how they were trying to 'become independent' by reading as regularly as possible at school and at home.
- Pupils achieve particularly well in science, with, for example, almost every pupil in the most recent Year 2 cohort reaching at least the expected standard, regardless of their ability or need.
- Disadvantaged pupils make above-average progress from their different starting points. Published information shows that the difference between their attainment and that of other pupils is reducing over time. This has continued this year, with their overall attainment in all subjects broadly in line with other pupils nationally.
- The most able pupils, and the most able disadvantaged pupils, make substantial progress in English. For example, this year a significantly greater proportion of these pupils achieved a greater depth of understanding in reading and writing, compared

with similar pupils nationally. The progress of these pupils is broadly average in mathematics.

- While most pupils of typical ability this year met the expected standards in different subjects, significantly fewer of them achieved a greater depth of understanding in them. This was due to a considerable number of these pupils having circumstances that made them vulnerable. These factors also explain the fact that, this year, the overall performance of boys was less than that of girls.
- Pupils' overall attendance has begun to improve from significantly low levels in previous years. School information provided to me indicates that the proportion of disadvantaged pupils who were persistently absent has declined by around a half and, for pupils who have special educational needs and/or disabilities, by two thirds. However, leaders and governors agree that more work needs to be done because attendance remains below the national average.
- The school meets requirements on the publication of specified information on its website.
- Children are kept safe and happy at the school's breakfast club. This provision is encouraging their better attendance and punctuality.

Next steps for the school

Leaders and those responsible for governance should ensure that:

- the rate of reduction in the level of pupils' absence is accelerated, so that attendance for all groups of pupils is raised to where it is at least broadly in line with that of other pupils nationally.

I am copying this letter to the chair of the governing body, the regional schools commissioner and the director of children's services for Derbyshire. This letter will be published on the Ofsted website.

Yours sincerely

Roary Pownall
Her Majesty's Inspector

Information about the inspection

During the inspection, I shared my key lines of enquiry with you, which related to:

- whether the areas for improvement, identified at the last inspection, had been addressed effectively;
- the progress of pupils whose skills are broadly typical for their age;
- outcomes for boys; and
- the reasons for the increase in pupils' absence and what work is being undertaken by leaders to attend to this.

I met with your senior leadership team, representatives of the governing body and the subject leaders for English and mathematics. You and I visited classes in all year groups

to observe teaching and learning. I looked at pupils' work across the school. I observed pupils' behaviour in lessons and met with a group of them at breaktime. I considered the views of 13 parents posted on Ofsted's online survey, Parent View, along with comments they made on its free-text facility. I also spoke with parents at the end of the school day. I read a range of documents, including the school's self-evaluation, your school development plan and information on pupils' outcomes. I visited the breakfast club, which is maintained by the governing body, to check that pupils were safe. I studied information related to attendance, anonymised examples of teachers' appraisal and examined safeguarding records and policies. I examined the school's website to check that it meets requirements on the publication of specified information. I met a sample of staff and discussed with them their opinions of the school and its leadership.